

# Notes on Library Policy

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## **Policies explain *why*, not *how***

Every day, public librarians, staff, and volunteers make many decisions. They choose a few books from the over 50,000 published annually. They decide whether to close the library when a holiday approaches or a snowstorm hits. They act on requests to use the library meeting room. They deal with boxes of gift books from the community. They answer questions about public access to the Internet. These and other daily decisions can be handled efficiently, consistently, and fairly when there are policies for guidance.

Policies bring order, logic and stability to a library's operation. They can explain procedures, clarify confusing situations, and defuse conflict before it escalates. Policies may not prevent problems,, but having policies will make staff better equipped to face questions and crises. Policies protect the individual rights and freedoms of all, often by aligning the local public library with its heritage: the First Amendment, Library Bill of Rights, Freedom to Read, and Code of Ethics.

Written policies lend continuity; new board members and staff will have guidelines as they learn the ropes. Trustees use policies to help insure that the board's general service philosophy is followed. If the library's practices aren't consistent with the policies, make changes to the policies or the practices.

## **Trustees adopt policies – librarians carry them out**

Besides hiring a librarian, creating policy is the major responsibility of public library trustees. Under Vermont law [2 VSA 143 (a)], trustees have the responsibility to make policy. Representing the community the library serves, trustees must develop an underlying philosophy to guide the day-to-day services and operation of the library. The librarian, who works so closely with the community and its library, has valuable experience and practical perspective to share in policymaking. Staff and community opinion are also important in developing policies.

Policymaking is a group process that should result in consensus about philosophy of service. All trustees should stand behind the policies the board adopts, while the librarian and staff put them into practice. If staff finds the policies don't work or need revision, they should suggest changes to the board which may adopt or modify them. It's a two-way process.

Developing library policies isn't always easy. It may involve hours of discussion, even disagreement. Encouraging debate and public involvement during the policy development process isn't just healthy, it's vital. Once a board officially adopts any policy, all trustees and staff must support it publicly and answer questions about it in a positive manner. Work out differing views before staff have to work with the policy and then back it publicly in a unified manner.

## Policies should be written

Even the smallest library with a long, stable history should have written policies. Writing policies down prevents misunderstanding by giving everyone involved with the library a common point of reference. When questions occur, either from the public, staff, or trustees, the policies can be reviewed for possible solutions. Not every situation will become clearer with a written document, but having an articulated set of values will guide decision making.

Writing policies starts with a general discussion of ideas at a board meeting. One person, often the librarian, takes notes and puts the ideas together into a draft policy. The board may look at other libraries' policies for inspiration and language. Mail the draft to the group a week before another meeting during which members offer reactions and suggestions. The board may need to review and revise several drafts before coming to agreement. The process of reaching consensus is important to seeing that policies are followed consistently.

Using sample policies makes the writing and discussion process easier. The Department of Libraries offers advice on policy drafts. Sometimes a fresh eye will see areas inadvertently forgotten to cover or point out questions about how policies are used. Policies should cite authority when they are issued on the basis of Vermont statute, the American Library Association or other source such as the PATRIOT Act of A.D.A.

## Policies reflect the library's philosophy

Policies should be general, broad, and flexible enough for unusual circumstances, but should also address many of the activities and circumstances library staff encounters daily in serving the public. No one is able to anticipate every situation that arises. Use simple language, with as little library jargon as possible, to make policies clear and understandable to staff, trustees, municipal officials, and the general public. Because policymaking is an intense process, policies should last, but the board will need to review periodically.

Policies should reflect the library board's philosophy of service rather than offer details of procedure, rules, or regulations. For example, instead of saying, "the library will be open 14 hours a week," and listing specific days and times, say "the library will be open during hours most convenient to the public, at least 14 hours a week." The second statement is more flexible and general, yet it reflects a philosophy or approach to service. Another example might be the statement that job descriptions will be developed for all staff, rather than including the actual job descriptions in the policy.

### Do...

**Use active voice and positive statements** in writing policies. Tell what the library will do, rather than what is not allowed. For example, replace "Textbooks will not be bought," with "The library purchases items of interest to the general reader and looks to schools to provide textbooks." Even the most exclusionary statement can be written in a positive manner, as in the common sign, "Thank you for not smoking." Rewrite sentences until they sound straightforward, positive, and authoritative.

**Keep policies brief and simple** for more flexibility. Identify areas that need more thorough coverage and details. Some boards prefer lengthy policies.

**Focus on administration of the library**, not the board of trustees. Procedures for board operation are called by-laws. Bylaws include election or appointment, term length, rules for conducting meetings and other board issues.

**Review library policies annually**, and revise them as necessary. If board members sign and date policies on adoption, the date is a reminder for review.

**Make sure all trustees and staff members have copies of policies.** Every new trustee's orientation should include discussion of policies. Welcome questions as a means to understanding the thinking behind the policies. This valuable background will speed his/her becoming an active trustee.

**Keep a copy of the policies at the circulation desk(s) and on the library website** so that the public has easy access to them. Encourage staff and volunteers to refer questions about policy to the librarian. Consider publication to local media when the topic warrants it.

## Develop policies in several areas

In general, every public library's policies should include a statement of its mission, goals, and priorities. In addition, a library's policies should address general operation, collection development, behavior, use of electronic resources, and personnel. If the library is part of municipal government, employees may fall under town/city personnel policies; a separate library personnel policy should parallel that of the municipality. The board should consult with an attorney before adopting personnel policies.

### Public Library Policies: What to Cover

#### Service Philosophy

- Mission statement - the library's role in the community, who it serves, and its priorities
- Governance - relationship to community, municipal government, and services and organizations, reflecting the framework in which it operates
- Identification of primary users and their needs
- Service goals in brief – focus and how the collection matches the focus

#### General operation of the library

- Who may use the library? Nonresident use, out-of-town borrowers, seasonal residents, etc. Under what circumstances will privileges be denied?
- Fines and fees – not allowed for regular library services. When and for whom are fees appropriate? How decisions are made
- Hours of operation - a general statement about how they will be determined
- Holidays to be observed
- Responsibilities of staff, trustees, the municipality
- Relationships and cooperation with community organizations, Friends group, schools, other libraries statewide and locally, and other service agencies.
- Use of facilities, equipment, and display space - Meeting room use and exhibit areas should be addressed consistently. ALA has recommended guidelines
- Unattended children and their supervision

- Confidentiality of registration, circulation, and other records (see “Confidentiality” below)
- Nondiscrimination - a statement welcoming everyone regardless of race, gender, religion, economic status, disability, national origin, etc. If the library is not accessible to people with disabilities, note alternative delivery methods and state that programs and activities will be held in alternative sites with prior warning.

#### Collection Development (Materials Selection)

The collection is the primary resource for providing service. Much of what a library does relates to its collection. The bulk of a library’s policy may address collection development.

- Principles of intellectual freedom (see “Intellectual Freedom” below) - refer to or put the library’s slant on various national documents which might be appended to the policy
- Responsibility for selection - who on the staff makes the decisions?
- Criteria use to evaluate potential additions for the collection, such as:
  - form/format - video? DVD? periodical? download?
  - subjects emphasized and those for which other library collections should be used, particularly those in the community
  - reading level, scope, treatment - scholarly vs. general or layperson’s approach
  - reliance on interlibrary loan for items beyond the scope of the collection
  - tools to be used in selection process. Discuss the process rather than listing titles
  - responsiveness to public requests and current interests
- Restrictions, if any, on use - this might cover historical, Vermont, and reference items
- Gifts - apply the same evaluation criteria to them as with other items
- Weeding, withdrawal, and disposal - include general criteria and philosophy behind regular reassessment of materials’ usefulness to the collection
- Availability of materials for people with disabilities through the Department of Libraries Special Services Unit
- Procedure for review of selections - outline the process used when material is challenged and append a Reconsideration form to be used

#### Behavior code

- Promote the safety of staff and the general public; safeguard library property
- Reflect the law where appropriate or municipal code (harassment, e.g.)
- Behavior should not single out age groups for special treatment

#### Personnel

Whether incorporated or municipal, a public library’s personnel policies should show cognizance of federal and state employment laws.

- Hours worked, breaks, overtime, weekends, nights
- Leaves for vacation, sickness, jury duty, maternity, family medical emergencies, etc.
- Job descriptions, performance evaluations, probation, , promotion, termination, retirement
- Staff orientation, continuing education, professional organizations, meeting attendance
- Grievance process (usually the only time support staff present at board meetings)
- Payment of staff dues and expenses for travel to meetings, conferences, workshops, etc.
- Fringe benefits, employee privileges
- Conduct, attitude
- Use of volunteers
- Nondiscrimination

Public access to electronic resources, including the Internet

The library may wish to incorporate specific guidelines for use, or state philosophy for use. For more information see the American Library Association website <http://www.ala.org>.

- Philosophy - why service is offered, what the proposed benefit to the public will be
- Who may use the services and what is available
- Minors' use of resources and parental supervision

Confidentiality and Privacy

- By VT statute [22 VSA 171ff] public libraries must keep records of patrons 16 or older confidential unless the patron waives that right. Public libraries must disclose the records of patrons under 16 if requested by parents.

Review/Revision of policy Essential, but often forgotten.

## **Problems still arise in libraries with policies.**

Policies should be adaptable to fit a variety of situations, but sometimes they are too vague or general. Broad statements such as "our goal is to provide good service" are not clear enough because everyone has definitions of "good" and "service." Policies should demonstrate what is meant by the terms used.

Some libraries' policies are too detailed or include documents that should be separate. Staff and public procedures, rules of conduct, internet access rules, staff job descriptions, and trustees' by-laws are all separate documents that may be referred to in policies but not incorporated in them.

Confusion does arise between librarians and boards of trustees concerning responsibilities for policymaking and for administration. In fact, this confusion is at the root of most librarian-trustee conflicts. Sometimes, it's easier to deal with problems of procedure rather than to address philosophical questions because the latter can become emotional and are harder to articulate. Individuals may have a proprietary feeling toward the library and want it run their way. A public library should operate under a group vision, one that is developed by the board and staff together, and policies can help insure that direction.

Sometimes problems arise when someone connected with the library - trustees, librarian, staff - doesn't take policymaking seriously enough. If the policymaking body doesn't put enough thought and discussion into creation of a policy for its library, the group will not understand or own it. The resulting document may not reflect actual library practices or the needs of the community or even the ability of the library to provide a particular service.

Clearly thought out policies make staff more prepared to deal with issues as they arise. Without adequate policies, individuals may end up making policy as needed, and communicating unwritten strong policies to others. Inconsistent service ultimately results.

A librarian should expect a free hand in carrying out policy, just as trustees should expect policies to be carried out with dedication and respect. Policy creation should happen at a warned meeting, not on the street or at the circulation desk. Save disagreements about policies for board meetings, but welcome discussion and examination of policies on a regular basis. Set aside time at least once a year to review all policies, particularly when new board members begin their terms.

## Resources for Sample Policies

<http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/otherpolicies/guidelinesdevelopmentimplementation.cfm>

Begin with the American Library Association (ALA) for writing and revising policies related to collections and intellectual freedom, privacy, and meeting rooms.

<http://ct.webjunction.org/policies-procedures/-/articles/content/2922866>

Connecticut Public Libraries have posted and bylaws and policies by topic at Webjunction.

[http://midhudson.org/departments/member\\_information/library\\_policies.htm](http://midhudson.org/departments/member_information/library_policies.htm)

The Mid-Hudson Library System of New York has put together a compilation of public library policies and tips for policy development.

A number of Vermont public libraries post policies on their websites. Some choices include Brooks Memorial Library, South Burlington Community Library, and the Sherburne Memorial Library.